



The Aiken Bluegrass Festival

Pickin' and Grinnin' at its Best

By Stephen Delaney Hale

If you follow the sound of mountain music down the last narrowing ridge of the Great Smoky Mountains, you'll come to a foot-stompin' halt at the Aiken Bluegrass Festival.

Four years old in May 2007, the Aiken Bluegrass Festival is already an important stop on the national circuit as it winds its way around the Carolina mountains where it was born and throughout the rest of the country.

From the start, the Aiken festival has drawn some of the greatest names in Bluegrass—and their fans. Part of the reason for the festival's instant popularity is its venue. The new, wide-open Newberry Street Festival Site in downtown Aiken was fashioned by the city for just this sort of thing.

The two-day festival brings a duo of musical experiences, united by the spell of great Bluegrass music. Aiken's "horsey set" loves to party, so the Friday performance is classic Aiken—a casual-dress gala with music, buffet and open bar under a fancy white tent where the music of Mountain Heart (the 2003 Bluegrass Performers of the Year), Steep Canyon Rangers and others has stirred the crowd.

Saturday is a daylong celebration of all-American music in the wide avenue in front of the theater. Several thousand even-more-casually dressed fans turned out last year for a day of fast and fine foods, lazy walks through Aiken's quaint "Alley" restaurant and shopping district and great Bluegrass music. Families and children are the focus of Saturday afternoon, with rides, games and hard-driving music that grabs the kids instinctively and gets them dancin' in the street.

When the sun goes down, a vintage hoedown picks up the

pace. Many parents take their children home, only to return for some truly great Bluegrass from Old Crowe Medicine Show, Reeltime Travelers, Larry Keel, Peter Rowan and Tony Rice and headliner Sam Bush, among others.

Aiken organizer Steve Groat says Bluegrass music has a unifying effect on a community, with an appeal that stretches across all ages, incomes and social levels.

"And our festival is for a wonderful cause, supporting STAR Riding and Driving, an equestrian volunteer organization dedicated to helping children and adults with disabilities through therapeutic interaction with horses," says Groat. "We couldn't be more pleased, bringing great music to our town and helping so many through the music."

Make your plans for some musical fun May 11-12, 2007. For more information and a lineup of events, see www.aikenbluegrassfestival.org

